



Empowering Students, Teachers, Non-teaching Staff and Parents in a 'Troubled High School' through Strategies of CP Multidimensional Interventions

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Empowering Students, Teachers, Non-teaching Staff and Parents in a ‘Troubled High School’ through Strategies of CP Multidimensional Interventions

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Abstract

In this paper, we outline some of the main principles underlying the intervention strategies that have been used in a project aimed at empowering students, staff, teachers and parents. This project reduced dropout, truancy, failure and bullying rates in a very disadvantaged Italian region.

INTRODUCTION

Elsewhere (Francescato & Tomai, 2001; Francescato, et al. 2007; Francescato, 2007; Francescato, 2008), we have described how European community psychologists have tried to develop some theoretical principles that should guide community psychology practice, and discussed several theoretically driven intervention strategies, such as *community profiling, multidimensional organizational analysis (MOA), small group skills and personal empowerment training labs*, which may promote “amelioration” and “transformation” kinds of changes at the local community, organizational, small groups and individual levels.

In this paper, we will describe the theoretical guiding principles behind some intervention strategies; used in a problem-ridden high school in a disadvantaged Italian region, and attempt to evaluate to what degree we were able “to put theory into practice.”

THEORETICAL GUIDING PRINCIPLES

CP interventions should try to have the following characteristics:

- *Encourage pluralistic interpretations of social problems that integrate objective and subjective knowledge, and broaden the viewpoints from which a given situation can be considered.*
- *Examine the historical roots of social problems and the unequal distribution of power and access to resources in the social context.*
- *Give voice to minority narratives, and promote the production of new metaphors*

or new narratives that help “imagine” new scripts and roles for individuals and social groups.

- *Create ties among people who share a problem.*
- *Identify the points of strengths to obtain a change.*
- *Spread psychological knowledge and competencies.*

THE “SOCIAL PROBLEM” WE WERE ASKED TO HELP SOLVE

The European Commission has funded several programs to diminish the number of students who either drop out of high school, or repeat grades or have negative school experiences that affect both their performance and their wellbeing. Italy has been a strong recipient of funding since it has a very high rate (19%) of students who either drop out, or take two to three years longer to complete their high school education. In some regions of Italy this percentage reaches 40% of students attending professional or technical high schools.

The ample international literature has documented that several factors concur in increasing school failures rates: *individual variables*: low self-esteem, low expectations, poor study habits, learning difficulties etc.; *b) relational aspects*: primarily negative interactions with peers and teachers; *c) organizational characteristics*: worn-down school buildings, burn-out or unqualified teachers, rigid or disorganized teaching models, etc.; *d) family variables* such parents’ low educational achievement, low parental supervision on homework, few books at home,

parent-teacher conflicts; and e) *community aspects*: location in deprived areas, isolation, etc. Most projects aimed at reducing drop-out and school failures have been trying to reduce these risks factors, but few have tackled more than one or two groups of variables; generally working more with students and or teachers, but much less often with organizational, family and community aspects (Anderson-Butcher 2008, Doll & Hess 2001) For instance, some interesting projects such as the Seattle Development Project (Hawking et al., 1992) worked with both parents and teachers of children attending elementary schools to successfully prevent drug abuse and delinquency.

However they neglected to work directly with children, or on organizational and community aspects, and perhaps these limits contributed to lack of differences between experimental and control groups in their attitudes toward drugs and moral values. Another interesting intervention was conducted in Montreal and focused only on parents and students (under 14) who were offered training labs to acquire new social skills; the program was successful in decreasing antisocial behaviors in the experimental group. These experiments were done in primary schools where dropout rates are very low compared to high school and so they could be relatively successful involving only some components of the school community. Most school interventions programs also in Italy focus mostly on students or teachers or parents, almost never on school administrative staff or other organizational variables (De Piccoli & Lavanco 2003). Our research team had also successfully used specific interventions techniques in projects with limited aims such as to increase high school student's empowerment, or parenting skills of parents of junior high pupils or primary school teacher's skills in affective education (Francescato, Tomai, Mebane 2004).

However the high school that we worked with, obtained funds from the European Commission to make an experimental intervention, because it was a 'multi-problem school' in a deprived area of southern Italy. Schools authorities wanted to decrease its 40% drop-out and failure rates,

lower bullying, vandalism and stealing among students, diminish burn-out among teachers and alienation of many parents who avoided contacts with teachers and stop the decrease in students enrollment We therefore thought that to attempt to tackle such a variety of problems we had to use a systemic approach to promote organizational change and consider intervention strategies which involved all the school stakeholders.

Proposals were sent in by various institutions and work groups and our project based on the integration of principles and intervention techniques from community psychology and affective education was awarded the grant. We aimed to achieve the project goals by enabling the different components of the school community to use tools such as multidimensional organizational analysis, community profiling, small group facilitation, and affective education techniques in dealing with negative emotions to promote both individual and institutional empowerment. We hypothesized that using these different tools would enable stakeholders to diagnose strong and weak points in their school, work better in small groups to design effective change programs, create stronger affective bonds, improve problem solving and conflict resolution, and therefore decrease risk factors and increase protective factors which have been found to affect drop-out and failure rates.

FIRST PHASE: ASSESSING STRONG AND WEAK POINTS OF THE SCHOOL AS PERCEIVED BY DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH MULTIDIMENSIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS (MOA)

Learning about MOA in small core groups (five weeks)

The high school we worked with had 1,500 pupils, of which 55% had repeated at least one year, 60 non-teaching staff, and 230 teachers and educational experts.

We first met with a core group, which included the principal and representatives of parents, teachers, students and non-teaching staff such as administrative personnel and janitors. We

explained that from a community psychology framework, we considered them the “experts” of their school community and we would suggest only modalities through which we could together gather their viewpoints on strengths and weaknesses of their school. We then explained how MOA works and we agreed to form nine core groups, each composed from 15-20 participants; “three groups consisted of students of varying age, one group consisted of only parents, one group consisted only of teachers, one only staff including office clerks and janitors, and three were mixed including members of all school stakeholders. In each of the nine groups we held five weekly three hours meetings, in which trained community psychologists facilitated the MOA process, which begins with a brainstorming, called preliminary analysis. Members of the groups list strengths and problems, and then classify them as belonging primarily to one of the four organizational dimensions: structural-strategic, functional, psycho-environmental and psychodynamic-cultural.

These four dimensions follow a continuum that varies from dealing with “hard” structural and functional “objective variables” (adequacy of school facilities, increase or decrease of number of students, failure rates, drop out percentages, age and educational level of staff, levels of staff turnover) to “soft” cultural, psychodynamic subjective perceptions (emotional climate, problem-solving styles, attitudes toward power, inter-group conflicts, level of satisfaction, etc. MOA follows some of the most important theoretical guiding principles, which require community psychologists’ interventions to encourage pluralistic interpretations of social problems that integrate subjective (soft dimensions and objective knowledge (hard dimensions), and examine the historical roots of problems as perceived by the different stakeholders giving voice to people who are less powerful (in our school students and janitors).

One result emerged clearly: each stakeholder group was primarily blaming another group for most of the school problems. Teachers thought students were not interested in learning and had non-supportive parents. Students blamed teacher’s unfairness in grading them and their

hostile and humiliating behaviors; non-teaching staff underlined high teachers’ turnover and burnout; and parents thought one main weakness lay in the teachers unfriendly and blaming attitudes towards parents, who “scared parents away.”

The summaries from the preliminary analysis were hung up in the corridors of the schools, so that between meetings all members of the school community could view what each different group considered problems and strengths. Another flip chart outlining convergences and disagreements was compiled by a small task force including members of all the nine groups and also hung for general viewing.

In the second weekly meeting, we explored the structural-strategic dimension: the oldest member narrated the strategic history of the school, when it was born, what goals and visions it had, how strategic goals had changed in time. Then they did a “positioning exercise” in which they choose criteria with which to evaluate their organization’s performance in the recent past. Then taking into consideration legal, economic and other structural limits, each group defined strategic objectives for the immediate future and for next five years, and the weak and strong points of this dimension. Then the functional dimension was examined, outlining tasks to be accomplished to meet the goals, and weak and strong points identified. All nine groups agreed that the main structural problems were lack of a cafeteria, double schools shifts (one groups of students working mornings and another afternoons for lack of sufficient space), an inadequate gym and poor heating facilities. More disparities appeared for the functional dimension: for instance only non-teaching staff complained about teachers ‘unplanned absences, and underutilized labs and library, only students mentioned the lack of parking spaces for their motorbikes which caused daily quarrelling among students, only the parents mentioned the presence of drug dealers near the school.

Then each group examined the cultural or psychodynamic dimension using a variety of tools drawn from cultural psychology, cultural anthropology and socio-analysis. This dimension explores group and individual emotional

variables that are often not consciously discussed, basically using group drawing, recurrent jokes, favorite anecdotes and things hung on walls to assess prevailing affective and power relations. To capture crucial emotional attitudes toward problems and problem solving, we used also the movie script technique (Francescato 2008). The members of each subgroup make up a movie script about their school, choosing genre (drama, documentary, science fiction, comedy, thriller, etc.) main characters and main episodes of the plot. They can choose to narrate or perform by acting some significant scenes. Then all participants discuss which prevailing positive and negative emotions emerge from their script and the problem solving styles adopted. The three students' scripts had titles that described very poignantly their pessimistic view of their school. One chose a verse of Dante on Hell: "Leave any hope, you who enter here", another which had among its members several "likely to drop out students" chose "Alcatraz" as their title and the third group "Titanic". Their plots reflected coherently emotions of anger, despair, and hopelessness, but their acting showed sense of humor and vitality. Two groups, non-teaching staff and parents, chose science fiction stories or fairy tales in which problems of strong conflict among groups were sometimes solved, but always by the intervention of some extraordinary personage who came from another world. Discussing their movies, they agreed that changing their school seems to be a task for Superman. The only teachers group titled their film: "The Beach of Last Resort" and described an isolated and polluted beach where people who lost their houses or jobs came "because they had nowhere else to go" and spent their days on the beach fighting for any scrap of food. The movie script technique is used to put into practice the theoretical principle of giving voice to minority narratives.

Finally, each of the nine groups explored the psycho environmental dimension, which basically measures the fit between individuals' expectations and organizational pressures. Generally, we use tools taken from organizational psychology to measure perceived leadership styles, communication and conflict

resolution patterns. After weaknesses and strengths have been identified by the various organizational actors, and the connections among the various dimensions have been explored, participants formulate different narratives and preferred visions of the future. We used these techniques that correspond to the theoretical principle to promote the production of new metaphors that help "imagine" new scripts and new roles for social groups.

Members of nine groups made numerous proposals for possible changes, but they felt that for these to be implemented, it was necessary to involve more people in the decision-making processes. Since the school did not have enough time or money to have everybody participate in small groups, they came up with the idea to create four questionnaires: one each for students, parents, non-teaching staff and teachers. All questionnaires should contain questions pertaining to all the four dimensions explored in their small groups, but should also have wider sections, examining in depth issues concerning each type of stakeholder.

Building, distributing and analyzing questionnaires (two months)

Two trained community psychologists, experts in building questionnaires, met three times with core groups of students, parents, teachers and non-teaching staff and helped them build the four questionnaires that asked respondent opinions about problems and strengths emerged in the core groups: for example, the adequacy of school facilities, the way courses were taught, attitudes toward schooling, relations between students, teachers and non-teaching staff, including the principal, relations between parents and children, causes of school failures, affective and emotional school climate and proposals for change. Teachers decided to give their questionnaires to all their 230 colleagues, (only 39%) responded. Also non-teaching staff decided to poll their entire population of 60, (44% filled the questionnaires). Students and parents distributed their questionnaire to random representative samples of their population: 467 students and 459 families. Of these, 75% of students and 41% of parents took part in the survey.

Results showed a high amount of agreement with the diagnoses made during MOA process, but some interesting new proposals were formulated for each problem in each of the four dimensions. For instance, we learned that 22% of students worked to help families in financial crisis, and therefore some truancy was due to their skipping school to help families, so it was proposed to that the school act as go between for public agencies to give financial aid to families, which often did not know which public office to contact. Most students and parents felt school's programs were not preparing students adequately for jobs, so in addition to program changes they proposed practicum and stages in local firms to be organized by the school. To reduce the authoritarian and hostile confrontational style of many teachers it was suggested to offer them training courses on adolescence and affective education. To help students who had low scholastic achievements some asked to provide teachers more training in evaluating academic weaknesses in the different subjects and providing effective remedial tutoring. To lower school's disorganization it was suggested to improve the running of staff meetings to increase communication among teachers and non-teaching staff, and to develop the ability to work in teams and networks. In general, most proposals dealt with finding ways to motivate and empower students, and to lower interpersonal conflict among the different constituent groups. Most respondents felt that the quality of relationship among students, between teachers and students, parents and teachers was poor and needed improvement.

Choosing priority problems and adopting proposals for change

Points of strengths, problems and proposals for change discussed in the nine core groups and emerging from the four questionnaires were presented in a general school meeting in which all four stakeholder groups were present and several decisions were taken. The authors used the questionnaire technique and the public discussion of results of MOA as a technique that corresponds to the theoretical principle that community intervention should identify points of strengths to obtain feasible changes.

The first was to create work groups to deal with some of the structural and functional problems identified: 14 such groups were formed. Since teamwork had been problematic in the several existing committees, several teachers and non-teaching staff felt these new work groups could not be productive if people did not improve their group skills. It was then decided that the same community psychologists who had facilitated organizational analysis, would periodically supervise these work groups for the first six months of their functioning.

To help students who had strong learning deficits, a large group of teachers (about 85) obtained the use of remaining European funds to finance a three-month course on individualized evaluation of students' academic deficits and strengths, providing an individualized teaching methodology for high-risk students. Experts in evaluation and teaching of high-risk students were called in to implement this course.

To ameliorate emotional and relationship problems it was decided to use some remaining funds to empower burnout teachers, students and parents. Some of the same community psychologists involved in the MOA process took part in the three projects, which we will briefly describe.

PHASE TWO: IMPLEMENTING SPECIFIC EMPOWERING PROJECTS AIMED AT STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Teachers' empowerment training focusing on affective aspects of education through two-day workshops over a two months, with online supervision for the following six-months.

As "the Beach of Last Resort" title of their movie script revealed, most teachers felt unhappy to be in this high school, seen as a place, as one teacher put it, in which "the most difficult students and the most burnt out teachers are gathered in a run-down building in a disadvantaged neighborhood abandoned by all!" More than half of the teachers, after the MOA process, joined one or more of the work groups established to deal with structural and functional problems that they had identified as factors contributing to their dissatisfaction. About 80

teachers recognized that they needed to improve their didactic skills; in fact, and chose to take part in the individualized didactic training project that was started after the MOA process, which aimed to increase their competencies in analyzing students' study methods, and in evaluating students' logical, mathematical and linguistic skills. About a third of all teachers however, felt competent in their teaching skills, able to live with functional and structural weak points, but unwilling or not able to cope with hostile, unmotivated, unruly, and disrespectful students together with uncaring, indifferent or hostile parents. They felt isolated, unable to gain or give support to colleagues in dealing with difficult students. "We mostly end up fighting or feeling powerless and misunderstood," said one teacher discussing this issue.

To empower this group of teachers, we followed the theoretical principle of spreading psychological knowledge and competencies. We used a methodology we have developed, which integrates community psychology and affective education components, whose efficacy has been evaluated in many schools from kindergarten to high schools (Francescato, Tomai & Mebane, 2004).

In recent years affective education proponents have gained more attention since several theories have recognized that emotions are at the core of the process of self-construction and definition. Moreover, as levels of violent and antisocial behaviors have increased in many schools, more educators have been concerned with exploring how children and adolescents learn to deal more positively with interpersonal conflicts and strong negative emotions. Among the tools developed by socio-affective education that favor the creation of social capital, the most well known is the "circle time" where students sit in circle facing one another and discuss topics of their choice. The regular use of circle time has been found to promote prosocial behaviors, better peer relations and self-esteem, to reduce exclusion, to foster mutual aid and awareness of others' feelings (Karpinnen, et al. 2005, Lang, et al. 1998).

In our integrated methodology, we modified the circle time method by placing some participants

in turn, outside the circle, as observers of the group process. Observers use a facilitation functions schema first proposed by Johnson and Johnson (1975) and readapted by Francescato and Ghirelli (1988). Four main group variables are observed: 1) structural (the number of members, recruitment procedures, degree of hierarchy, place and time, etc.) 2) task variables such as productivity, participation, decision making norms etc. 3) process variables such as collaboration or conflict, risk propensity, emotional climate, phases of group development, etc. 4) individually related variables such as manifest emotional states, communication styles, etc. Observers, at end of each meeting, have ten minutes to provide data on how the group worked in the meeting, pointing out weak and strong points of group functioning from the four view points and how the facilitator helped or hindered group work. We have been using this schema for many years to evaluate graduate students group skills acquired both through face to face or online workshops (Mebane, Porcelli, Iannone, Attanasio, & Francescato, 2008).

Discussing topics chosen by participants in a circle time allows people to share experiences and feelings, to create a mutual help atmosphere, to increase social capital and to experience how emotions impact on learning experiences. Using the observers' data to learn about small group dynamics empowers group members by making them more capable of understanding the weak and strong points of the different groups to which they belong. We wanted to empower teachers by fostering their capacity to facilitate circle time with their students, and also become better members and facilitators in their work groups. We also aimed at improving their communication and motivation skills in dealing with at risk students at the individual level and at reducing conflicts between parents and teachers, exploring how changes in family and work patterns in the last decades have created new burdens for both parents and teachers.

This type of empowerment training starts with an exploration of personal and collective histories, to understand 'our emotional capital', that is what negative and positive emotions we have accumulated, especially in our early

experiences, that may still influence us today and help or hinder us in fostering personal and social change. To understand their personal past, the seventy teachers who chose to participate, were encouraged to recall: a) their positive and negative school experiences as pupils in elementary, junior and senior high school and b) how their teachers dealt with negative emotions such as anger, shame, envy, jealousy, sadness etc.

They also explored their “work novels”: their triumphs and failures as teachers, and outlined similarities and differences between themselves as adolescents and those they met in their classrooms. Then they discussed how education, work and family had changed in the last decades to see the connections between personal and social changes. They also simulated dealing with situations they found hardest to handle such as giving negative feedback to students in empowering ways and receiving negative feedback, and controlling their anger or disappointment.

Teachers took turns in facilitating discussion, observing group processes and making written reports. Specific problem solving, brainstorming, conflict mediation and active listening techniques to help particularly needy students on an individual basis were also presented. Trained teachers started using their modified circle time techniques in their classroom for one hour once a week, assisted by an untrained colleague, so about 140 teachers were directly or indirectly involved in this training processes. Online supervision was offered to teachers in the one-month interval between the two training workshops and self-help group meetings among teachers were encouraged. Teachers learnt some planning and evaluation procedures that they applied in the 14 work groups, that were trying to implement specific functional and structural changes. Community psychologists supervised these groups for about six months.

Empowering parents to raise children in the “risk society”

To raise children in the ‘risk society’ has become a difficult task for parents, as families have undergone dramatic changes. The mass

entries of women in the labor market and the women’s liberation movement have initiated a process of individual liberation from traditional sex roles. While these changes have given more opportunities for many individuals to live less constricted lives, and offered the opportunity to men and women to play more equal roles in parenting and in family life, it has also increased the difficulties of maintaining satisfying long-term relationships. The rate of separation and divorce has risen in all western countries; many children and adolescents have to cope with their parents’ separation and remarriages, sometimes with second or third divorces. Many young boys grow up in families where there is no adult male, and they construct a vague idea of what masculinity is, modeling themselves on what they see in videogames, TV shows and movies. The lack of male models at home is compounded by the decrease of male presence in schools. The increase in bullying and violence has been attributed by several authors (Pittman, 1993; Andolfi, 2001) to the need of boys, uncertain of their own masculinity to prove their maleness by acting violently and attempting to dominate others.

In the last decades, furthermore, globalization processes have changed work conditions: fewer people are hired for a lifetime position; more people fear to lose their jobs and have to live with great occupational uncertainty. International competition has lowered salaries for unskilled positions, forcing men and women to take second jobs to make ends meet. Working hard or being unemployed makes it less likely for parents to have the mental and physical energy to be able to be effective parents.

Parents of the adolescents who attended our high school had often both troubled marriages and work problems. Dealing with emotional breakup, drug and alcohol abuse, and unemployment or low paying jobs, they were often not able to act as competent and caring parents. So we decided to implement a pilot empowering workshop for parents. The workshop, which lasted three months, with 12 two hours meetings, was attended by 22 parents, of which 16 were women. We only did one workshop because we had very limited funds for working with parents. This was a major financial

limit that prevented us from reaching many parents, but we trained some teachers to be able to hold such parent's workshops the following years.

The aims of the empowerment workshop, were to offer opportunities for parents: a) to understand how changes in family and work patterns in the last decades have created new burdens for both parents and teachers, b) to increase couple and parental efficacy, c) to foster the development of parents self-help groups and d) to encourage parents to join the works groups created to tackle the structural and functional problems found in the MOA process.

To lessen the "blame the parent or teacher syndrome" the workshop promoted the socio-political awareness that the difficulties parents and teachers experience in dealing with adolescents were not the problems of single individuals, but had different roots, which required a pluralistic interpretation. To this end we introduced family, school and work "novels": we asked workshop members to tell the story of their grandparents, how they liked or disliked school, what kind of work they chose or were forced to do, how sex roles were handled, and how negative emotions were expressed. Then we encouraged them to talk about their parents and then about themselves, and to see the connections between social, economic and political changes and the evolution of education, work and sex roles in their families.

These specific methodologies try to apply the theoretical principles of examining the historical roots of present problems. Many parents had undergone bad school experiences themselves and had dropped out. Most had parents who did not have good school experiences and transmitted to their children their attitudes of dislike and diffidence about schooling. Moreover for many parents as for their grandparents it was impossible to find the job they liked, they had to settle for what they could find. Most participants consciously desired for their children to finish high school and find a good job, but they became aware that they had ambivalent feelings regarding work and family requests, and that often they did not use the emotional energy to concretely support positive

school involvement by their children. As one parent admitted, "I scream at him one day, but the next day I am so busy or worried about my problems with his father that I do not control if he goes to school or not." Parents stated that school personnel and teachers did not offer any concrete help on how to handle resentful, angry, or withdrawn adolescents, who were doing poorly at school and many felt embarrassed or fearful when meeting teachers.

Circle time techniques were very helpful in allowing parents a space to vent negative feelings like anger and guilt. Moreover, strong affective bonds were created among some parents, which enabled them to find ways to help themselves and their children. About half of the parents promoted two self-help groups, and about one third joined some of the work groups set up to solve transportation and cafeteria problems. These techniques were used to apply the theoretical principles on the importance of fostering the development of affective ties among people who share a problem.

Empowering students by increasing their ability to evaluate themselves and their communities

Among the problems signaled by students during the multidimensional organizational analysis, two were most frequently selected, the desire for a less hierarchical and conflicting relation with teachers and the need to make more friends among classmates. Several had mentioned that some students had left school without telling anything to their classmates or the teachers, others had emphasized some students were isolated, did not help one another, saw no relation between their studies and their future lives.

We designed a 40-hour, one-week workshop for ten classes, with 20 to 30 students that had a high membership of at risk students, in which two trained community psychologists provided opportunities for students:

- a) To understand the historical roots of their attitudes toward education and work by using the "work, school, and family novel" technique already described in the teachers' and parents' workshops;

- b) To examine their preferred media and how their values and desires were shaped by mass media;
- c) To evaluate their weakness and strengths in the study habits and leaning styles;
- d) To learn group skills to evaluate weak and strong points of their class groups and to use problem solving and creativity techniques to promote desired changes in the class room, using the same integrated methodology to promote teamwork described in the teachers 's training;
- e) To learn a short version of MOA to understand the problems areas and strengths of their school. For instance, they explored the psycho environmental dimension that measures the fit between individuals' expectations and organizational opportunities and constraints. Students in groups of two or three might decide to interview teachers, janitors, the principal and other students. Students made up the content of the interviews, simulated the interview in small groups in which they played the different roles, under the supervision of the two community psychologists. After conducting the different interviews, they used group discussions to integrate the various results to diagnose strong and weak points of this organizational dimension of their school.
- f) To find jobs or other opportunities for themselves and to identify resources in the local community that could network with their school. To achieve this particular aim a short version of profile analysis, a technique, which examines a local community from eight viewpoints, was presented (Martini and Sequi 1988). In a classroom of 24 students, for instance, they formed eight groups, each of them focused on examining one profile: territorial, demographic, economic, institutional, services, psychological, anthropological, and future, using the appropriate data gathering technique. Then they gathered together and confronted their data and made proposals: for instance they identified the community institutions or groups the school might network with or what job opportunities the community could provide. The

methodologies we used with students followed the theoretical principles of broadening the viewpoints from which a given situation can be considered, examining the historical roots, giving voice to minority narratives, creating ties among people who share problems and identifying points of strength to obtained desired changes.

EVALUATION PROCEDURES; STRENGTHS AND LIMITS OF THE PROJECT

A complex variety of evaluation procedures was used to assess whether the intervention strategies had helped achieved the stated goals. We had postulated that following the theoretical principles described at the onset of this paper, in designing and implementing intervention processes, and having students, teachers, parents and non-teaching staff learn to use specific community psychology intervention techniques would produce desired results and produce personal, group, and institutional empowerment.

Institutional empowerment was operationally defined as the ability 'of stakeholders to evaluate the school strengths and weakness from multiple viewpoints and to take different kinds of actions to increase the school's efficacy to retain its students, to lower their failure rates and reduced truancy and bullying. At the end the intervention that lasted a whole school year, from October till June, the dropout rate had diminished. In the previous year out of a student body of 1700 students, 521 students had left school (30.6%); after our intervention, out of 1500 students enrolled only 298 left (19.9%). The failure rate (the number of students who flunk and had to repeat the year) decreased 15%. Six hundred eighty students out of 1700 (40%) flunked in the year previous to the intervention, and 372 out of 1500 (24.8%) afterwards. Good results were obtained in the reduction of episodes of vandalism and bullying. Four hundred such episodes were reported the year before the intervention compared with less 300 the following year. The combination of the various initiatives promoted desired changes; however a limitation of this project is that we do not know which specific intervention was most related to

the reduction of each type of problem. Further research should address this issue.

We had also hypothesized that all the stakeholders would increase their personal and group empowerment by increasing their ability to evaluate their strengths and limits as individuals, but especially their capacity to “read” the surroundings in which they live, be it a small group like a class, work group, or a school committee.

Increase the ability to evaluate one’s own strengths and abilities

Teachers, parents and students, which participated in the empowerment training, wrote personal statements about their participation in the course, and community psychology trainers took daily notes. Analysis of these data or records showed that 85% of the comments referenced positive personal changes. One common feature was an increase in the understanding how one’s own attitudes about work or school were shaped by personal and social history and the recognition that events had multiple explanations.

We also asked students to write a detailed movie script in the morning of the first day and in the afternoon of the last days, and in the second movie scripts students changed the way problems were faced, moving from a fatalist framework from a more active role in determining the lives of the protagonists.

This project was so well liked that we received many requests to implement it in other troubled high schools. We found however that for very problematic teachers, parents and students our intervention was too limited and they would have also benefited from individual or family counseling, which our project did not provide.

Learning group skills

Teachers’ ability to handle teamwork was evaluated by gauging how they facilitated circle time discussions with students in their classroom and or how they performed as facilitators and observers in one of the 14 workgroups formed after the initial MOA. Two community psychologists performed the evaluations based on direct observation during meetings and on

note taking by the observers in each group. Students’ competence was evaluated directly by the two community psychologists who led the workshop when students participated in the different groups that conducted the profiles analyses and the multidimensional organizational analysis.

In both groups participants performed more adequately in finding strong and weak points of group functioning than in facilitating. The best performers were teachers who participated in one of the nine MOA original diagnostic groups, in the teachers training and also were included in the 65% of teachers who applied the circle time methodology in their classroom after training.

How much were we able to put guiding theoretical principle into practice?

We did encourage pluralistic interpretations of school’s problems through the MOA process and the broad range of interventions. Especially through ‘work, school, and family novels’ we did examine the historical roots of personal and social problems, and gave voice to minority narratives of non-teaching staff and students, who have generally less power in schools in identifying problems and solutions.

Affective education tools helped create emotional ties and lessen the isolation that parents and teachers had denounced as prevailing in the individualistic and conflict-ridden school culture. The two self-help groups created by parents give evidence of this process. We did identify points of strengths to favor change and did spread some psychological knowledge and competence. A follow-up carried out one year after the end of the project showed that drop out and failures remained lower than before the intervention. However, networking between schools and community organizations improved only slightly, and only half of the 14 workgroups were able to continue to have productive and well-facilitated meetings. The principal and some prominent teachers, who had become fairly competent in all the skills proposed during the intervention nonetheless suggested we should have extended our supervision for longer periods, demonstrating how hard it is to go from theory to practice when

it comes to “giving psychology away” and making our presence obsolete!

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